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## **The 15-M movement and the new media: a case study of how new themes were introduced into Spanish political discourse**

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### **Abstract**

The 15-M movement, driven by mass mobilisations calling for the regeneration of the political system in May 2011, has had a profound impact on Spanish political discourse. This paper analyses the changes in news production and distribution resulting from the example set by this social movement. The introduction of news using social media outside the boundaries established by the journalistic and political elites represents an innovative strategy to bring the movement's demands onto the mainstream media agenda and to instigate monitoring processes.

**Key Words:** new media, *Spanish Revolution*, 15-M movement, social media, news media environment, news cycle, media hybridity, monitoring processes.

## **Introduction**

On 18 August 2011 a group of ten officers from the National Police Corps strode purposefully along a street in the centre of Madrid, on a tense day marked by the Pope's visit and the peaceful protests of secular citizens against the drain on the public purse of this event. The protesters' public denunciations of the treatment they had received from the police in the preceding days had met with scant attention. But a video was soon to turn the events into a news story with remarkable repercussions in the Spanish political discourse, first virtually, and then in the mainstream media. The video of the ten police officers, a 17-year-old woman and a freelance journalist was filmed by a witness who followed the police and captured the events on a mobile telephone.

The footage, just over three minutes long, shows the determined advance of the police officers to the area where both the faithful and the secular were amassed. A young woman confronted the police, asking, 'What's happening?', to which one officer responded with a direct punch to her face. The woman began to shout, and while another protester tried to pull her away, the police hit her various times with their truncheons. The police then turned on another young man who was taking photos from a few metres away. The photographer Daniel Nuevo, a freelance journalist, was also the target of several blows that forced him to the ground, at which point the police officers moved off. At that moment, Carlos, the person filming the whole scene, ran over to Daniel who, upset and shocked, was left speechless. Carlos tried to calm him down and uttered the key words, 'it's all on film'. In a matter of hours the news went viral. Daniel Nuevo wrote his account of the events on his blog<sup>i</sup>. At the same time, the independent journalism website *Periodismohumano.com* covered the story, debates raged on *Twitter* and the video, uploaded on *Youtube*, had over half a million views in 24 hours<sup>ii</sup>. Once the story had circulated through cyberspace at dizzying rates, it finally broke into the mainstream media. The police action against secular protesters, an issue previously ignored, was then given significant space on the media agenda<sup>iii</sup>. In this way, a new story broke into a politically inflamed context that has come to be known as the 15-M movement or the *Spanish Revolution*: a wave of citizens' protests that has introduced new themes into Spanish political discourse. This movement has also contributed to the spread and transnationalisation of the citizens' protests initiated in Iceland in 2008, which solidified in Spain in 2011 and then spread across the globe through movements like *Occupy Wall Street*.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the changes that are currently taking place in news production and distribution through the paradigmatic example of the 15-M movement. We use case study methodology to examine how this social movement has generated news, outside journalistic and political elite circles, that has broken onto the mainstream media agenda and spread its demands throughout Spanish political discourse. The citizens' protests in Spain, and their use of the new social media, testify to the advent of a new hybrid news environment that represents an opportunity for change in shaping the public agenda, to date dominated by the mainstream media.

This paper presents a specific case study of the 15-M movement, using case study methodology that gathers information from three source types: documents

produced by the 15-M movement (manifestos, etc.); journalistic material on the 15-M movement published or broadcast by the media; and user-generated content on the 15-M movement disseminated through the social media. The analysis combines these three sources in an attempt to explain how news production and distribution is changing in the digital context.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section describes the characteristics of this new news environment. The second section focuses on the 15-M movement, in particular its social bases, the demands included on its political agenda, and its use of the social media. Section three analyses the parameters the 15-M has followed to generate news and examines some case studies. Finally, the paper concludes with reflections on the contributions and scope of the 15-M in the transformation process that both the information and political systems are currently undergoing.

### **The changing news media environment: the emergence of a hybrid system**

Numerous transformations are taking place in the news media context as a result of social media and Web 2.0. One of the most significant changes is the advent of a new news environment and an ensuing profound reorganisation of news production and circulation (Chadwick, 2011; Fenton, 2010).

This new news environment is the result of two key processes: an increased number of actors involved in the news production chain, and changes in information flow. These changes are manifest in three essential aspects: accelerated dissemination of news (McNair, 2003; Hermida, 2010; Karlsson and Strömbäck, 2010; Phillips, 2012), increased flexibility for news distribution through multiple platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Heinrich, 2010) and the global expansion of information (McNair, 2006; Castells, 2009).

The proliferation of social spaces on Internet has provided citizens with the technological tools not only to consume, but also to produce news. Any individual can generate messages that reach a global audience. Mass self-communication (Castells, 2009) thus emerges, offering citizens more opportunities to express their points of view autonomously and contribute to the information flow (Stanyer, 2008; Rodrigues, 2010). Citizens share news and intervene in public debate, rolling out a polyphony of voices in the political discourse (Casero-Ripollés, 2010).

Technological innovation has empowered the public (Jenkins, 2006). Citizens are turning into active players in the information process; now they can submit news to the media, the end result of which is citizen journalism and user-generated content (Hermida and Thurman, 2008). Moreover, they can monitor and respond to mainstream media news coverage of events (Schudson, 1998; Deuze, 2008; Keane, 2009; Casero-Ripollés, 2010). Audience intervention therefore has two dimensions: firstly, the public can now intervene in the news through comments, responses, etc., and secondly, individuals can intervene in the news production process by providing news (Carpentier, 2011).

Similarly, the horizontality of Web 2.0 is spawning changes in the news production chain with the appearance of new information actors. News production is therefore becoming decentralised (Heinrich, 2010) and opening up to new participants. The information landscape is now hyper-competitive due to the rise in the number of news gatherers, and is no longer restricted to news professionals.

This process is breaking down the journalistic and political elite monopoly over news construction (Casero-Ripollés, 2010). These elites have no option but to interact with citizens and the new information actors in producing and distributing the news (Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2007; Im et al., 2010), and are now abandoning the ‘iron cages’ in which they operate (Davis, 2010). The information environment, which previously revolved around the interactions of a small number of actors (journalists, politicians and spin doctors), now includes numerous groups and individuals who can create news. As a result, this environment is now more difficult to control (McNair, 2006; Hermida, 2010).

This new news environment heralds a paradigm change. The scenario of top-down information control under the journalistic and political elites to maintain social order has shifted to a new dynamic in which chaos prevails. Here, surplus of information has replaced scarcity, many-to-many news distribution channels prevail over one-to-many, transparency prevails over opacity, accessibility over exclusivity, interactivity over passivity, and competition over monopoly (McNair, 2006). Instability and interdependence hold sway in this new news environment, which is defined by uncertainty (Lowrey and Gade, 2011). Journalism is heading towards modified and redefined power relations and the disappearance of existing dividing lines. The eradication of borders is tied in with the process of digital convergence (Jenkins, 2006;

Dupagne and Garrinson, 2007; Deuze, 2007) that is shaping the new news environment. In this context, journalism is becoming increasingly liquid (Deuze, 2008) and operates in a more open scenario. This new news environment has given rise to a system of hybrid news (Chadwick, 2011), based on a blend of old and new media (Fenton, 2010). The outstanding events of 2011 have clearly revealed the new news environment's potential to create new stories. The Arab uprisings, mass protests in Greece and, later on, the fast growing #Occupy movement, are examples of this new phenomenon. In these cases, the new media have played a prominent role in coordinating the protests, in communicating real-time images and up-to-date information, and in the processes of contagion (Cottle, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Della Porta, 2011). The 15-M movement offers a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon, as we explore below.

### **The 15-M movement and the way it uses the new media**

The 15-M is a civic movement that, since May 2011, has been calling for urgent transformations and improvements to the Spanish democratic system. This plural, horizontal, non-party movement, with a broadly middle and working class base, is a clear exponent of a civil society movement based on the principle of plurality that (to date) complies with and defends the imperative of non-violence and is being constructed as a political actor that, in the words of Habermas (1996: 487), mounts a continual siege on the fortress, 'without intending to conquer the system itself'. The wave of protests spreading across the whole of Spain since 15 May 2011 has cemented under the name of 15M, taken from the date of the first protest, and presents a political agenda of reforms conceived to improve the political system – without intending to overthrow or take control of the established political power – and the firm commitment to bring it closer to '*Real democracy now*', the main slogan adopted by the '*indignados*' (the outraged).

Citizen discontent with the democratic reality in Spain has its roots in a series of deficits that, when taken together, have spawned an unprecedented mobilisation in the form of varied protests, repercussion in Spanish political discourse and capacity for citizen organisation through networks. The main causes of this outrage include high rates of unemployment (above 20%), political corruption, public spending cuts, the positioning of the political class as the third concern among Spanish citizens since the

end of 2009, and the PSOE/PP two-party system – due to an electoral system that effectively strangles any real chance of success for smaller parties. Faced with this scenario, Spanish citizens, as civil society actors, are expressing their discontent by acting as 'a permanent thorn in the side of political power' (Keane, 1988), demanding democratising transformations through numerous and varied actions: street protests and marches, prevention of evictions, online petitions, cycle protests, long-distance mass marches for democracy (the latest covering 1,500 kilometres from Madrid to Brussels), discussions with politicians on Twitter, as well as the now internationally famous encampments for democracy in the squares of over 53 Spanish cities, with the Puerta del Sol (Madrid) at its epicentre. This broad range of actions was instigated by citizens convinced of the need for reform, and who fully exploit the opportunities the new news environment offers (García Marza, 2008).

The 15-M was the first mass mobilisation organised through Internet in Spain (Dans, 2011), a call that successfully took over the streets and the squares, and as we explain below, has impacted on the news creation process and brought issues into Spanish political discourse. Some of the 15-M's main achievements are precisely its capacity to consolidate through the social media – where mobilisations are organised and disseminated –, its ability to produce news in the new media and its effective impact on the mainstream media. The platforms *Democracia real, ¡ya!* (Real democracy now!) and *Juventud sin futuro* (Youth with no future) expanded through the social media, particularly on *Facebook* where a group of citizens rapidly confirmed that their own political concerns were shared by many others<sup>iv</sup>. Their adoption of a plural position, open to all persuasions, meant hundreds of followers joined in and the mobilisation began to take shape in this way, first through Internet, and later on the streets (Sampedro and Sánchez Duarte, 2011).

The 15-M's political agenda has been refined and defined through a complex network of mass assemblies, virtual forums and debates on the social media, and includes a list of measures such as the abolition of the Spanish anti-downloading law, eradication of tax fraud and immediate reform of the electoral law. The movement's political agenda consists of eight broad fields: elimination of certain privileges for the political class, real separation of powers, measures to combat unemployment, promotion of rights to housing, development of quality public services, regulation of the banking sector, tax reform, and the implementation of mechanisms for citizen participation.

All these issues have, in one way or another, entered Spanish political discourse in a context of journalistic chaos (McNair, 2006) in which the number and diversity of news providers has grown exponentially. Even international media like The Washington Post, The New York Times, the BBC, La Repubblica or Al Jazeera have covered the protests, lending an international dimension to the 15-M. The movement's expansion is also due in good part to its own channels of communication, such as Sol TV which, using live streaming on Internet, enabled viewers in more than 50 countries to follow the Puerta del Sol encampment<sup>v</sup>.

### **The 15-M movement and the generation of news**

The generation of news about the movement has followed a complex route in which the social networks and new media have played a central role in the advent of a dynamic, chaotic, communicative structure. During the first days of the protests, the 15-M achieved a strong presence in the social media with a range of trending topics on *Twitter*, which in turn led to heavy traffic on alternative media such as *Periodismohumano.com*, the most cited media on *Twitter* between 15 and 19 May 2011. A video on *Youtube* showing an aerial panorama of the rally in the Puerta del Sol on 17 May 2011 also received great attention with more than four-hundred thousand views in the first week<sup>vi</sup>.

The response of the old media was somewhat slower, but no less significant. On the day of the protests, not one newspaper announced the rally on its front pages, and on the following day, only three Spanish papers – *El País*, *El Mundo* and *Público* – led with the story. However, 15-M gained news space as the protests continued, the number of demonstrators grew, and the encampments strengthened the movement, to the point that all the main newspapers devoted their front pages to the story on Thursday 19 and Friday 20 May 2011. Television coverage followed a similar pattern: initially timid reporting eventually gave way to live reports broadcast from the Sol protest encampment.

The movement went on to receive considerable coverage in both the Spanish and the international media. The protests and the encampments were news items, and the *indignados'* political demands attracted further media attention. In this way, the debates and discussions – initially held in cyberspace – now reached different audiences and

spaces. The encampments were organised into various committees: activism, legal, maintenance, organisation and media relations. The media relations spokespersons were the centre of media attention for several days, a position that was constantly rotated to avoid any one spokesperson being singled out as a 'leader'.

The *indignados* thus managed to get their demands onto the media and political agendas, incorporating news that was under the mainstream media radar, and demonstrating the potential of Internet to mobilise citizens and instigate public debates. The 15-M movement has raised many broad and varied issues, but of outstanding importance is the depth of penetration – across both old and new media – of news on public spending by certain Spanish state institutions, whose function and structure has been called into question. In a context marked by scarce resources, the 15-M movement has forced the redefinition and justification of 'who gets what, when and how' (Keane, 2009, 743), scrutinising in particular one of Spain's parliamentary chambers: the Senate. An email began to circulate at the end of May 2011, analysing public spending on the Senate – the chamber of territorial representation – whose political functions have waned considerably over the years. This email called for the abolition of the Senate, noting that countries like Norway, Sweden or Denmark have no second chamber, while the USA has two senators per state and Germany, 100 senators, compared to over 260 in the Spanish second chamber. This question was diffused through a process of mass self-communication (Castells, 2009) that shifted from a one-to-many to a many-to-many channel, with the email bouncing in and out of uncountable mailing lists. Dozens of blogs – *blogssostenible*,  *davidcontragoliat*, *alcorisa15m*, *wabblalogia*, *algosemueveencs*, *cambiemosespaña*, etc. – and websites – [www.change.org](http://www.change.org), [www.capital.es](http://www.capital.es), [www.peticionpublica.es](http://www.peticionpublica.es), <http://eliminarelsenado.com>, etc. – also republished the content of the email and the issue was discussed in forums and on the social media<sup>vii</sup>.

The subject was taken up as a central point for discussion within the movement and on the communication spaces it uses, but it also broke through the news media 'barrier'. In September 2011, one section of the television program *Salvados* – an entertainment program with a humorous slant on its analysis of current affairs – portrayed a normal day in the Senate with a visit to the chamber and interviews with some of its members. The program's presenter, Jordi Évole, raised some of the issues from the 15-M's agenda, which he fused in a simple question, 'What use is the Senate? '.



Throughout his fifteen minute visit, the report revealed the scant participation and presence of political representatives. But most remarkable were the statements from some of the senators themselves. Juan José Lucas Giménez, a PP (Popular Party) senator, claimed that, ' today the Senate needs to be changed (...) its institutional role does not correspond to the Spain of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. Xosé Manuel Pérez Bouza, senator for the BNG (Galician Nationalist Bloc), went even further: 'in its present form [the Senate] has very little or no use at all'. He went on to say that the institution' is thoroughly questionable' and that 'no work is done here. Nothing's done here (...) and most people don't exactly know that the Senate is no use, because if they did, there would be more pressure'<sup>viii</sup>.

An entertainment program thus brought the subject into full public view (Harrington, 2005). The declarations came as a surprise to many of the program's 1,198,000 viewers and the senators' replies were discussed on social media like *Twitter* or *Menéame*. Numerous *Facebook* pages were created, with varying levels of success, calling for the abolition of the Senate or asking voters to spoil their ballot papers or leave them blank in the general elections on 20 November 2011, and the 15 minutes of footage from *Salvados* soon exceeded 11,000 visits on *Youtube*<sup>ix</sup>. The complex dynamics between old and new media generated a new story that managed to introduce a critical vision of the political institutions and representatives in a turbulent context at both an informative and a political level.

Neither have the mainstream media and their political role escaped the criticisms of the 15-M movement. In the Puerta del Sol encampment, an announcement for a space to consult the main newspapers was entitled 'lies corner'. Among the numerous placards carried by the *indignados* were critical references to the media, pointing to their lack of objectivity, their political servitude and their fraudulent versions of the police treatment of protesters. It is noteworthy, therefore, how this social movement has set up a monitoring process that affects not only the political class, but also journalist practice and the old media. This process has also driven various mainstream media to criticise certain practices among their professional colleagues and has led to news in which some mainstream media denounce cases of information manipulation or degeneration in other programs.

One of the clearest examples of this shift was the response to the manipulation of information in a program, *El Círculo*, on the regional television channel *Telemadrid*.

The journalist presenting the program, María López, attempted to discredit the movement by showing supposed scenes of violence during the protests<sup>x</sup>. She argued that the public needed to judge 'for themselves' the violence of the 15-M movement and went on to show three images of young people armed with sticks and stones. However, these images in fact came from a news story about mobilisations in Greece. The outcry against this manipulation of information was immediate. On the same day, the platform *Salvemos Telemadrid* (Save Telemadrid) berated the ulterior motives behind the use of the images. Newspapers like *El País* and *El Mundo* reported the story, while the social media reverberated with criticisms and demands for rectification and an apology from the channel<sup>xi</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The case of the 15-M movement shows how new actors are emerging in the new information environment and actively participating in the news production and diffusion process. Thanks to Internet, citizens operating outside the mainstream media have successfully affected and conditioned the significance and flow of the news within the turbulent political context.

The 15-M movement has used multiple channels, linked to the new media and social media, to create news about their demands that has circulated worldwide. These issues, most notably the regeneration of the political system or the elimination of privileges for the political class, were not previously on the old media agenda. The 15-M has exploited the potential of the new information environment to spread this new news, as well as influencing news coverage in the old media. In this process, the newspapers and broadcast media have had no choice but to report the protesters' demands, thereby granting them social visibility.

The 15-M communication strategy is based on indirect news management. By producing information in the digital environment, it has successfully introduced news related to its demands onto the traditional media agenda. Despite the success of this strategy, the old media still remain at the heart of political life in contemporary democracies. While the Internet is gaining ground as an emerging information space, we are still a long way from a situation where the new media supplant the old, and the new information actors are fully established.

The analysis of the 15-M case also reflects the advent of new democratic dynamics. This social movement is an example, in Spain, of the growing strength of citizen monitoring. On one hand, it has turned a watchful, critical eye on the political actors and decision making at a time of financial crisis. On the other hand, monitoring has included the media and how they report information. The emergence of an active citizen movement, which grasps the opportunities for public scrutiny presented by the new media structure, points towards a possible direction for change. It remains to be seen, now, whether or not these processes consolidate, and how the 'rules of the game' are redefined in Spanish political discourse.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Daniel Nuevo's post: <http://danielnuevo.com/blog/solo-por-informar/> (available since 19 August 2011)

<sup>ii</sup> *Periodismohumano.com* report on police action available at:

<http://periodismohumano.com/sociedad/libertad-y-justicia/policia-apalea-a-fotoperiodista-testigo-de-la-agresion-por-sorpresa-a-una-joven.html> (by 30 September of 2012 the video had been seen 974,862 times)

<sup>iii</sup> Video of police action against secular protesters during the Pope's visit (2011) is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zJCgUu5mtE>

<sup>iv</sup> While the facebook.com followers of the current governing party (Partido Popular - [www.facebook.com/pp](http://www.facebook.com/pp)) number around 52,700, in July 2012 Democracia real ¡ya!, [www.facebook.com/democraciarealya](http://www.facebook.com/democraciarealya), had over 455,900 followers

<sup>v</sup> *Sol TV* link: <http://www.soltv.tv/soltv2/index.html>

<sup>vi</sup> Video of the aerial panorama of the rally in the Puerta del Sol on 17 May 2011 available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar2nmOQZEjw>

<sup>vii</sup> The impact on Twitter of this protest campaign can be seen at: <http://total-impact.org>

<sup>viii</sup> *Salvados*' show of the Spanish Senate (25 September 2011) available at:

[http://www.lasexta.com/lasextaon/salvados/hoy\\_en\\_dia\\_tal\\_y\\_como\\_esta\\_constituido\\_el\\_senado\\_no\\_sirve\\_para\\_nada/268463/1061](http://www.lasexta.com/lasextaon/salvados/hoy_en_dia_tal_y_como_esta_constituido_el_senado_no_sirve_para_nada/268463/1061)

<sup>ix</sup> On 30 September 2012 the video had been seen 174,475 times. Among the most successful *Facebook* pages were [www.facebook.com/eliminarelsenado](http://www.facebook.com/eliminarelsenado) (get rid of the Senate) with more than 4,900 followers and [www.facebook.com/escanosenblanco](http://www.facebook.com/escanosenblanco) (parliamentary seats to represent blank votes or spoilt papers) with more than 1500 followers. Many others, such as [/www.facebook.com/noal.espanolsenado](http://www.facebook.com/noal.espanolsenado) (no to the Spanish Senate) and [www.facebook.com/no.lesvotes.1m](http://www.facebook.com/no.lesvotes.1m) (don't vote for them), had dozens of followers.

<sup>x</sup> Video of journalist María López using the wrong images in order to criticise the 15-M movement is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibir-3Y9ALQ>

<sup>xi</sup> Mainstream media reaction to Telemadrid program *El Círculo* can be followed in articles (in Spanish) at *El Mundo*, *El País* and *Público*:

<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/06/17/television/1308313623.html>,

[http://elpais.com/elpais/2011/06/17/actualidad/1308298630\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2011/06/17/actualidad/1308298630_850215.html) ,

<http://www.publico.es/espana/382491/telemadrid-usa-fotos-de-disturbios-en-grecia-para-atacar-al-15m>

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